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ABSTRACT

This digest addresses the importance to professional practice of ethics and shared values, focusing on the fields of health, physical education, recreation, and dance (HPRD). Practitioners in these fields routinely deal with situations that call upon moral reasoning and the articulation of values such as instruction about personal health, sexual behavior, use of alcohol and tobacco, fair play, and how one spends leisure time. While a unified code of ethics, covering a host of different specialties within HPRD does not exist, specializations share certain fundamental values, such as promotion of cooperative systems for self-expression (e.g., sport as an instrument for cross-cultural understanding), harmony between people and their environments, development of good character, familiarity with ethical concepts, and an interest in moral reflection. These shared values can be fostered in professional preparation and inservice education. Codes of ethics can reflect the moral foundation of professional life, provide an opportunity to instruct beginning practitioners in professional responsibility, and serve as a reminder to those in the field that continued practice is dependent upon compliance with specific expectations held by colleagues. (LL)

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ERIC DIGEST

ETHICS IN HEALTH, PHYSICAL EDUCATION, RECREATION, AND DANCE

by

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Ethics in Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance

Gerald S. Fain

Introduction

Ethics is a branch of philosophy—moral philosophy. When applied to a particular profession or field, ethics is useful in uncovering the values that drive practice. These values are sometimes clearly expressed in formal codes of ethics or they may find expression in the lives of the practitioners. This Digest will discuss the importance of ethics to professional practice, the importance of shared values, and the development of codes of ethics.

Shared Values and Professional Responsibility

Practitioners in the fields of health, physical education, recreation, and dance (HPRD) routinely take actions that require moral reasoning. Instruction about personal health (e.g., sexual behavior, use of alcohol and tobacco), fair play, and even how one ought to use free time calls upon moral reasoning and the articulation of values. The answers that professionals offer demonstrate both individual character and the collective values of their profession. These values can assert a unifying orientation to a collective group of specialized fields of practice.

Because the HPRD umbrella of specializations covers a host of different fields, creation of a single, unifying code of ethics is problematic. Moreover, there is no evidence that these professions want such a code. In contrast, it appears that many specialists believe that they need separate codes (see discussion in next section).

However, codes alone do not define the character of professional life nor do they necessarily express the most fundamental values upon which the specializations are founded. It is here, in the values of these fields, that it is possible to find a shared foundation. While these values are not systematically taught across professional preparation programs or even incorporated into professional codes of ethics, they can be found throughout the professional literature. The following examples illustrate this relationship between collectively held values and professional responsibility.

Promotion of cooperative systems for self-expression.

The Olympic Games provide good evidence of the way sport is viewed as an instrument for cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. International programs promote universal values and experience in cooperative living. They provide direct evidence that people from divergent cultures can create ways to live together that are based upon clearly understood and freely expressed values.

Harmony between people and their environments.

Caring for the earth, as taught by those in environmental health and outdoor recreation, embraces a view of the world that is dependent upon cooperation and respect for divergent and often competing value systems. This advocacy of harmony is centered in dedication to the conservation of natural resources, protection of ecological systems, promotion of environmental health, and appreciation of nature.

Development of good character.

Teaching is unavoidably tied to values. Students learn about values from their teachers. Within the formal and informal classrooms of those in HPRD, there are continuing opportunities to teach ethics. The virtues to be taught are many and remind us that ethics are ethics—it does not matter if it is a baseball game, nature hike, or dance class. Instructors who have been educated to think about their responsibilities as having moral import, can have profound impact on the moral character of those around them.

HPRD Codes of Ethics

When answering, "How ought I behave?" or "What ought I do?" practitioners draw upon the preparation they received. Often stated as professional responsibility, this training may include instruction in ethics. These guidelines for practice, ideally developed as the result of systematic field study, are typically represented in codes of ethics.

While the fields of health, physical education, recreation, and dance do not have a common code of ethics, codes are available to several fields within this group. For example, those who teach in schools may use the National Education Association code of ethics that applies to the practice of teaching across disciplines and gives no specific instruction to any of the teaching fields (Rich, 1984). The American Psychological Association (APA) provides sport psychologists with a code of ethics adapted from the ethical standards of the APA, which offers specific guidance for practice, including significant attention to ethics in testing (LeUnes & Nation, 1989). The National Therapeutic Recreation Society (1990) provides therapeutic recreators with a code of ethics that is particularly useful to those who practice in clinical settings where standards of practice are pressed by third-party regulators. The National Recreation and Park Association (1977) has a code of ethics suggested for adoption by state recreation and park associations. Other codes of ethics have been adopted by various professional groups related to the HPRD professions (Fain, 1990).

Value of Codes

Codes in and of themselves, however, do not have value

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unless they are actively used, interpreted, reviewed, and revised over time. Moreover, because codes address minimum expectations for practice they cannot go beyond matters of duty. A code cannot be expected to motivate bad people to behave well, nor can a code take the place of the individual's aspiration for good character or morally reflective practice.

Codes are important when they reflect the realities of professional life. Codes also declare to those outside the field the way these professionals think about their responsibilities. One can analyze the importance of codes within a particular profession by investigating the methods used in their construction, and by asking how the codes are included within programs of professional preparation, in-service education, and programs of certification and licensing. When codes are actively used in these ways, members of the group prove their collective will to hold each other accountable for a particular kind of behavior. A professional culture that finds this type of utility in codes of ethics assures the public that the group is serious about protecting them against harm from unethical colleagues.

A code is especially valuable in those circumstances where action by the practitioner will unavoidably result in harm to someone. Such instances may involve conflicting rights of students and teachers, athletes and coaches, or subjects and researchers. Ethical dilemmas require the mediation between competing interests. Codes may also provide guidance regarding professional etiquette concerning associations with colleagues, clients, and the public.

When there is no instruction from the profession, the practitioner alone determines what to do. In that case, practitioners use their reasoning, intuition, and/or practical experience with matters of right and wrong. Without instruction from colleagues this kind of decision making is often based upon self-interest and may be no more complicated than asking, "What does my employer or the public law require me to do?" (Fain & Gillespie, 1990). In searching for guidance, the practitioner gains no benefit from the collective experience and knowledge of colleagues. As a result, the basis for determining good practice is invented by each solitary practitioner and the opportunity for building a unified profession becomes impossible.

Conclusion

Codes of ethics, if properly crafted, can reflect the moral foundation of professional life. These codes provide an opportunity to instruct the beginning practitioner about professional responsibility, and they serve as a reminder to those in the field that continued practice is dependent upon compliance with specific expectations held by colleagues. Providing that attention is given to enforcement, they can be instrumental in guarding against those who believe that decency in professional behavior is all relative, all a matter of personal taste, or arbitrary preference for professional behavior.

Teaching well in ethics asks that the teachers have good character, are familiar with ethical concepts, and have an interest in moral reflection. Working to assure this goal, there needs to be attention given to moral philosophy within professional preparation and inservice education. Research agendas that collect and analyze case materials and thereby describe how ethical principles are applied within the specializations are needed. Great benefit would be derived if the specialized fields within HPRD were to create an ongoing conversation about ethics in their respective fields. If this were to occur, the unification of practitioners who serve diverse groups of clientele across a great number of environments will be realized. It is the ethics of these practitioners that serve as a common foundation for professional practice.

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References identified with an EJ or ED number have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Journal articles (EJ) should be available at most research libraries; documents (ED) are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 700 locations. Documents can also be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service: 1-800-443-ERIC. For more information contact the ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 610, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 293-2450.

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